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ABSTRACT

The Indiana State Assessment System, new for the 1995-96 school year, will emphasize student-constructed answers in both language arts and mathematics in grades 3, 4, 8, 10, and 12. Optional classroom performance assessments will be available for grades 2, 5, 6, 7, 9, and 11. Local diagnostic tests will be available at the same grades as the grades for the mandated assessments, and classroom portfolios will be required at all grades. The assessment system is a carefully planned set of assessments that work together to provide the information needed for understanding outcomes, planning instruction, and helping learners to become assessors of their own progress. Professional development will be needed to assure the assessment program's success. Whatever resources the state provides, Indiana school districts must work to expand those resources to assure that teachers gain the skills and understandings they need to build the program's success. (RS)

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The Indiana State Assessment System: Are We Up to the Challenges?

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by Roger Farr and Beth G. Greene

Mark Simons, IUB Instructional Support Services

Loren Donica, right, shows his class in applied economics how to assemble a marketing portfolio, including advertising, research, and product information. The Bloomington North High School teacher uses team projects to develop critical thinking in students.

Beginning with the 1995–96 school year, a new assessment system will be initiated in Indiana. This new assessment design is not merely a replacement for the *Indiana State Test for Educational Progress* (ISTEP), it is the first time the state has instituted an assessment system. The plan has been described in the spring 1994 issue of the *Indiana Educator*. While many details about the system are still being developed, the basic components are in place. The design calls for required assessments, including both short answer and longer responses, at grades 3, 4, 8, 10, and 12; optional classroom performance assessments at grades 2, 5, 6, 7, 9, and 11; local diagnostic tests will be available at the same grades as the grades for the mandated assessments; and classroom portfolios will be required at all grades. That's the skeleton of the plan, but the meat of the program is in the content of the assessments and the connections between the parts. It is what is being assessed and how the parts fit together and support one another that makes this an assessment *system*. The content of the assessments supports good instruction and emphasizes the kind of learning most teachers have nurtured in their classrooms.

The required state tests will emphasize student-constructed answers in both language arts and mathematics. Rather than selecting from a set of options, students will be expected to develop an answer. Moreover, many questions will ask the students to explain their reasoning and analysis of a problem. This means that a variety of alternative responses will be acceptable. It will be the students' thinking processes that will determine correct answers rather than merely supplying the right information. The assessments will go beyond recognizing right answers to applying information and constructing responses. For some teachers, this will be viewed very positively as they have been teaching this way.

Others will see the new assessments as pushing in new directions, away from the traditional ditto master skill and drill programs that too many have found as an easy substitute for real teaching and learning.

If teachers are to begin to develop or continue the kind of instruction emphasized on the assessments, they will need to carefully consider what the assessments are asking students to do. One way for teachers to do this is for them to become well acquainted with the scoring of these assessments. Training in the scoring of the assessment products will help teachers learn what constitutes a thoughtful, well-constructed response. In addition, teachers will need to consider how to help students learn the processes of arriving at these constructed responses. Classroom instruction will need to focus on helping students develop processes of *predicting, estimating, summarizing, explaining, using background knowledge, thinking about responses, and engaging in revising*. That's where the off-grade (optional) assessments will form an important part of the Indiana assessment system. Those assessments can become the basis of much classroom instruction. The classroom performance assessments will call for student constructed responses that emphasize the processes listed above and will integrate reading and writing. The mathematics assessments will emphasize practical, open-ended problems for which there are multiple solutions, and students will be expected to explain how they arrive at answers. Teachers will be expected

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to score these classroom assessments as part of their classroom activities, and they will need to learn how to examine the assessments to learn about students' thinking processes.

If teachers and administrators focus on teaching students to construct meaning based on what they have read and to solve problems, the optional classroom performance assessments will become the heart of a classroom portfolio that can be used to engage students in conferences about their learning. Thus, the assessment system will link the classroom assessments with the portfolios. Portfolios will include many other classroom activities and will become a significant component of the assessment system. Portfolios will be the ingredient that brings the students and the teacher together, and it will be the element that will be used to help the students become self-assessors. The effective use of portfolios should become the central focus of the entire assessment system. Portfolios may be new to some teachers, but many teachers have asked students to collect various classroom assignments and activities and have spent time talking to students about those materials. Student/teacher conferences and discussion of papers and projects are the basics of the classroom portfolio. It's not a magical new process. It is the kind of good instruction that has been going on for many years.

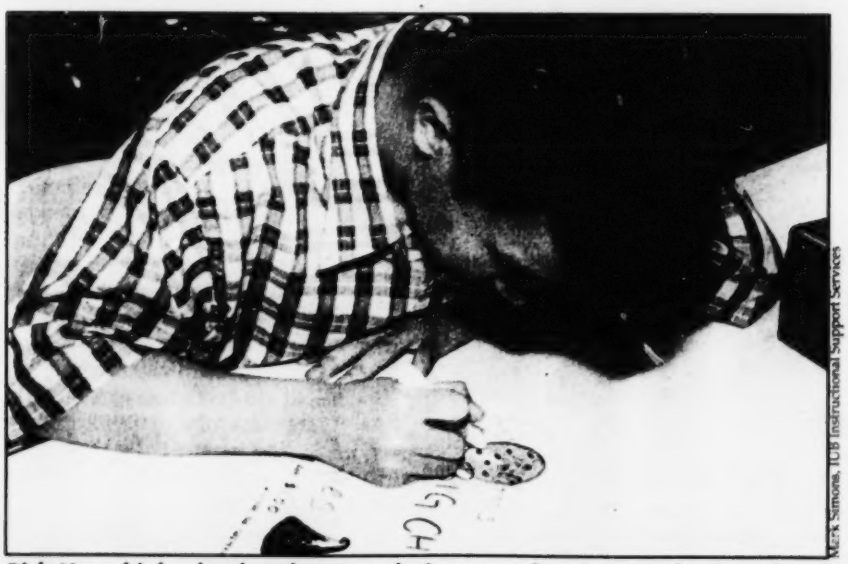
All of this means that there are two crucial aspects that Indiana educators must be aware of, and begin to plan for, if the program is to be successful. The first is to understand how the pieces of the assessment system fit together. Some educators may incorrectly conclude that this new assessment system is just a collection of different types of tests, an attempt to cover all the bases in this era of controversy about which test is best. That is not true: *The Indiana Assessment System is a thoughtfully conceived and planned set of assessments that work together to provide the information needed for understanding outcomes, planning instruction, and helping learners to become assessors of their own progress.*

The second aspect of the program that demands attention is the professional development that will be needed to assure the assessment program's success. The state legislature will be asked to provide additional resources for professional development, but it is almost certain that the amount that will be appropriated will fall short of the amount needed. Quite simply, there are too many demands on state resources to fully fund an extensive professional development program. It would be easy for Indiana educators to give up and say that the state doesn't care if this program is successful because it has not provided schools with enough money to do the professional development necessary to facilitate the program's success. If Indiana educators respond in that way, it is almost certain that education in Indiana will be thrust back into the era of multiple-choice assessment and skill/drill instruction. This is too important an opportunity to allow that to happen. Whatever resources the state provides, Indiana school districts must work to expand those resources to assure that teachers gain

Center develops performance assessments

The Indiana Center for Reading and Language Studies conducted a pilot tryout of performance assessments for the state. This project, directed by Roger Farr and Beth G. Greene of the IU School of Education, developed a series of performance assessments in language arts and mathematics that were administered to about 8,000 ninth-, 10th-, 11th-, and 12th-grade students throughout the state.

The tests, which were called the *Indiana Performance Assessments '92*, were designed as models of the *Indiana State Gateway Assessments* that will be required for high school graduation. These pilot tests became the models that were included in the request for proposals distributed to assessment developers who were interested in bidding on the contract to develop the new Indiana assessments.



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Rick Mu, a high school sophomore, designs an advertisement for Grandma's Big Chip Cookie Co., a class project in applied economics.

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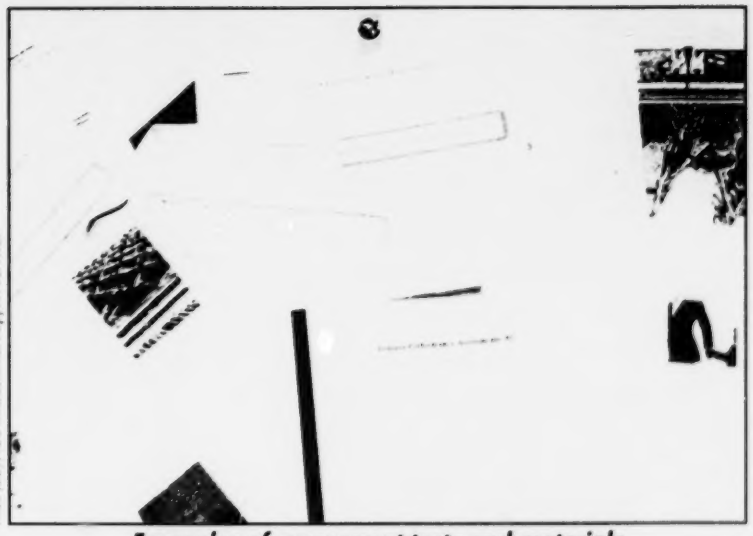
the skills and understandings they need to build the program's success. We must not return to the mindless skill and drill days of behavioral objectives. This is not just a set of new tests, it is a crossroads in the development of education in Indiana, and it would be distressing if we lost the opportunity for want of resources that we can supply by taking on part of the responsibility for professional development within our schools.

The *Indiana Assessment System* is a comprehensive assessment system. It has been designed to have a profound impact on education in the state. It is an opportunity to get the responsibility for assessment closer to the classroom. It is what many educators have hoped would happen for years. It is the realization that teachers and students together know best about learning in the classroom. The *Indiana Assessment System* poses challenges and promises for education in Indiana. If we use the assessment to focus on the teaching of higher level thinking skills, we will meet the challenge. ■

Roger Farr is IU professor of education and director of the Center for Reading and Language Studies. He also serves as the associate director of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication and is associate dean for research and graduate development. Farr is regarded as an authority in the field of reading assessment and instruction. He is a senior author in the area of measurement and evaluation for the language arts programs published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Beth G. Greene is an associate scientist in education and active researcher at the Center for Reading and Language Studies. She codirected the Indiana Performance Assessments '92 and Indiana University Performance Assessments '94. In addition, Greene develops guest columns for ERIC/REC and teaches courses in the Department of Language Education at the School of Education.



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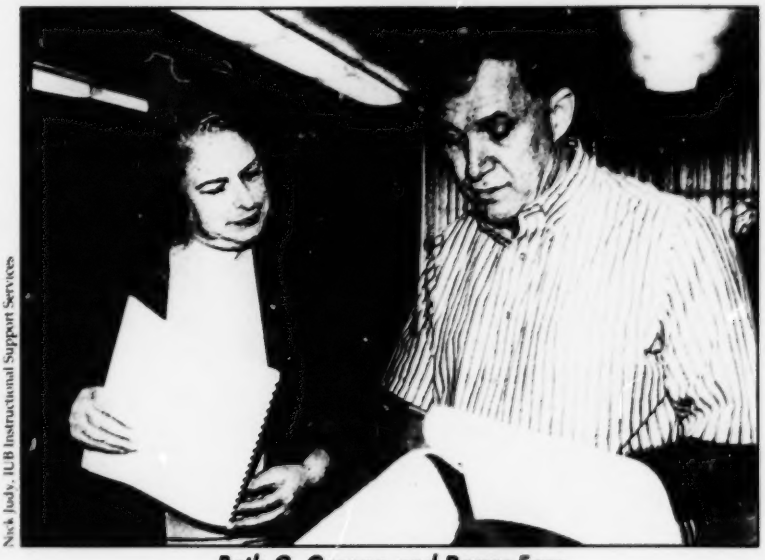
Examples of assessment tests and materials



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